

The Biblical Heritage Center's
DISCOVERING THE BIBLE
Learning about the people, beliefs, cultures, events, histories and places recorded in our Bibles. Discovering what the words of our Bibles meant to their ancient authors and audiences.
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Which Meanings Should We Use?

By Jim Myers

BHC Bible Study Tip: The meaning of a word may change over time.

Most people never think about the meanings of their words when they are reading something. Did you, when you started reading this newsletter? From the day we were born we have been compiling our own personal mental dictionaries and using them to interpret every word we encounter. Probably 99.99% of the time, we never really think about what words means, we just “know!”

My experience has been that when most people deal with words, they simply subconsciously apply the meaning they have in their mental dictionary, regardless of when or by whom they was written. *This can create some very interesting situations when the author of the message and the reader are separated by many years.* As time goes by, the meanings of words may change; some even pass completely out of the collective memory of later generations and become completely lost.

Let's have some fun and learn about language at the same time. Below is a message that should be easily understood by any English reader today. As you read it, make a few notes about what the underlined words mean to you. Please do these before you continue with the rest of the article.

Do you remember Mary and Bob? Mary is still a very naughty girl. Some say that would change if she weren't so nice. Her friends do not wish to give her any fellowship. A bunch of people do not approve of Bob being gay either, especially because of Mary's situation. Bob has been working on a new type of jet and hopes to sell it soon. I am sure that you remember his last job; they said he was a very good steward. However, you know how he looked back then, more than a few thought he had been intoxicated by the broker. By the way, see if there is a fire in the foyer when you get home.

What did you learn about Mary and Bob in the message? If it was written by one of your close friends today, it would probably mean exactly the same thing you are thinking. Below are the modern meanings of the underlined words, which I will insert into the message and rewrite it below.

- (1) **naughty** - *guilty of misbehavior*
- (2) **nice** - *pleasing*
- (3) **fellowship** - *companionship*
- (4) **gay** - *homosexual*
- (5) **jet** - *aircraft*

- (6) **steward** - *manager*
- (7) **intoxicated** - *drunk*
- (8) **broker** - *agent*
- (9) **foyer** - *an entrance hallway, vestibule*

Do you remember Mary and Bob? Mary is still a girl very guilty of misbehavior. Some say that would change if she weren't so pleasing. Her friends do not wish to give her any companionship. A bunch of people do not approve of Bob being homosexual either, especially

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because of Mary's situation. Bob has been working on a new type of **an aircraft** and hopes to sell it soon. I am sure that you remember his last job; they said he was a very good **manager**. However, you know how he looked back then, more than a few thought he had been **made drunk** by the **agent**. By the way, see if there is a fire in the **entrance hall** when you get home.

But what if the same message had been written by an English speaker who lived a couple of centuries earlier? Our eyes would see the same words, but the meanings could be very different. Below are the meanings that would have been known to people back then.

- | | |
|---|--|
| (1) naughty – <i>poor (one who had naught)</i> | (6) steward – <i>keeper of the pigs</i> |
| (2) nice – <i>stupid</i> | (7) intoxicated – <i>poisoned</i> |
| (3) fellowship – <i>giving money or goods</i> | (8) broker – <i>the one who opened the cask of wine</i> |
| (4) gay – <i>joyful, happy, enthusiastic</i> | (9) foyer – <i>a fireplace</i> |
| (5) jet – <i>a spout for gas or water</i> | |

Now let's return to the message and replace the underlined words with the above earlier meanings and see how this affects our mental picture of Mary and Bob.

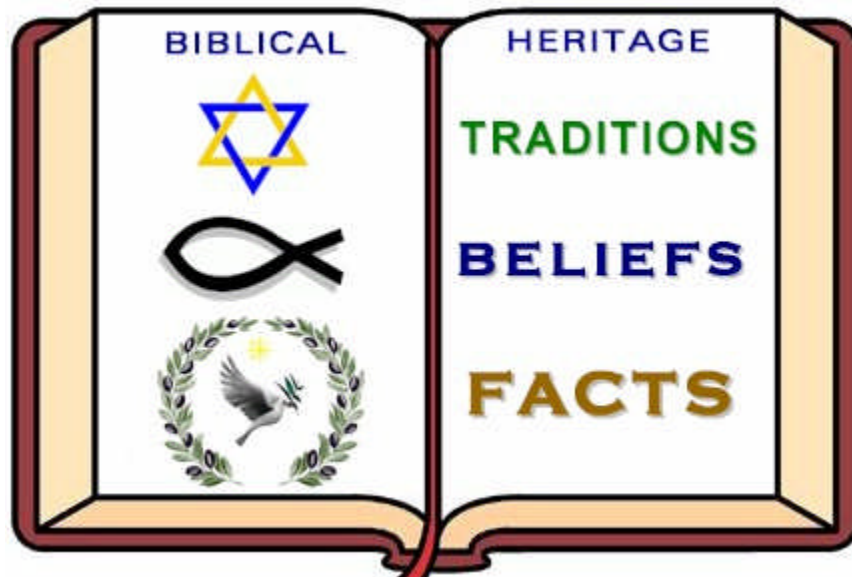
Do you remember Mary and Bob? Mary is still a very **poor** girl. Some say that would change if she weren't so **stupid**. Her friends do not wish to give her any **money or goods**. A bunch of people do not approve of Bob being **happy and enthusiastic** either, especially because of Mary's situation. Bob has been working on a new type of **spout** and hopes to sell it soon. I am sure that you remember his last job; they said he was a very good **keeper of the pigs**. However, you know how he looked back then, more than a few thought he had been **poisoned** by the **one who opens the wine cask**. By the way, see if there is a fire in the **fireplace** when you get home.

Isn't it amazing that the same words can paint such radically different pictures of Mary and Bob! If this message had been written by someone back in the 1700s, chances are that we would never really understand what it meant to him. This is especially true of native English speakers who just assume that they know what English words mean. Unless someone points out how dramatically the meanings of very familiar words in our own language can change, there is no reason for anyone to consider that they could mean anything else.

One of the most popular English translations of the Bible, the **King James Version** or **Authorized Version**, was originally made in **1611** and **revised in the late 1700s**. Just consider how many of the meanings of those words may have changed since they were written. How many modern readers of the KJV use their own modern meanings when they read their Bibles? *Have you noticed that some people, who never studied a Bible before, have an emotionally charged conversion experience and shortly thereafter start explaining what the Bible's words mean to others?* Not only do they attach their modern meanings to words written centuries before; they also declare that what they are saying is the "Word of God." They may not even be saying what the KJV translators meant!

Now consider what happens when turn the clock back one, two or three thousand years ago to the times when the original authors wrote the original texts of our Bibles in Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. How different could their meanings be from our modern English meanings? One of the primary goals of the Biblical Heritage Center is to do our best to help people rediscover those ancient meanings. The first question we urge you to ask every time you open your Bible is this – **What did these words mean to their original author? Don't you think it would be much more accurate and better if we adjusted our meanings to theirs, instead of replacing theirs with ours?** **BHC**

About the Biblical Heritage Center



It is our position that any person honestly and sincerely seeking spiritual truths will value and incorporate new factual information into his or her existing Belief System in order to make sure that it is as accurate as possible. The Biblical Heritage Center, Inc. is not a religious organization and therefore does not have a doctrinal statement or a statement of faith. BHC is an educational and research organization and the only guideline that we urge people to accept is:

*Our belief systems must be large enough to include all the facts;
they must be open enough to be tested; and,
they must be flexible enough to change.*

How could anyone that says they are "honestly" seeking the truth do otherwise? Could one honestly be a seeker of truth if he or she rejected factual information, refused to allow his or her beliefs to be tested, or refused to change when any belief was found to contain or be based upon error?

The mission of the Biblical Heritage Center is to help people and to engage the help of people in the quest for and discovery of spiritual truth and of moral and ethical guidelines for living in a multicultural and pluralistic world by providing information and activities based on the Bible and biblical traditions in an environment conducive to open and honest dialogue. The activities include discussing factual information about the Bible and biblical traditions, studying the Hebrew and Greek texts of the Bible, reaching conclusions about the meanings of the texts, and considering the applicability of these conclusions to life.

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Thank you!

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